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Food and Faith: A Cultural Reading of Esther David's 'Book of Rachel'

Abstract : Esther David's 'Book of Rachel' is an evocative delineation of the unique culinary habits and cultural heritage of the Jewish community in India. The novel vividly elaborates on how faith, cuisine and the ethnicity of the Jewish community survive in an alien ethos through the tale of Rachel Dandekar, the eponymous heroine of the story. Rachel, a lonely Jewish widow, residing in the remote Indian village of Danda, spends her time ruminating on the past, looking after the old and dilapidated Jewish synagogue and cooking traditional Jewish food. She employs food as a fundamental medium to assert her identity and to define her strength and vigour. Rachel preserves her ethnic culture with the help of her ethnic recipes. The novel evidently brings light to the cultural conflicts, sense of isolation and identity crisis of the Jewish minority in India

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Keywords - Cuisine, culture, ethnicity, food, identity

Food is a significant and inevitable aspect of human life. Food and culinary habits are associated with our mental state as a part of our individuality. Themes related to food are common among all types of literature and they are often employed as a literary device for both visual and verbal impacts. Food, together with eating habits are attributed with feminine identity and domesticity in many works of literature, particularly in the works of women

writers, who employ food as a powerful imagery to underline the issues of gender, language, culture, ethnic behavior and sexual politics. Esther David's *Book of Rachel* is an excellent epitome in this regard.

Esther David is a prominent contemporary Jewish Indian writer whose novels are meticulously woven around the ethnic anxieties and cultural memory of the diminishing Jewish community in India, particularly, the Bene – Israeli Jews, the community that traces its origin to the Jews who have escaped persecution in the second century B.C. in Galilee. Those escaped Jews are believed to be ship-wrecked off the Konkan coast of India and had slowly assimilated to the local way of Indian life. The novels of Esther David clearly expose the intrinsic inner conflicts and strenuous struggles of Jewish Indians to identify themselves and their roots. She profoundly portrays the sense of isolation and cultural dilemmas endured by the miniscule Jewish Indian community in her novels. Though the Jewish population in India has declined significantly, their culinary traditions still persist on the Indian land. Esther David has exemplified this fact elegantly through her Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel, *Book of Rachel*, which stands out for the simple reason that its each chapter has the name of a Bene- Israeli Jewish food and it begins with the details of an intrinsic and unique Jewish recipe.

Through *Book of Rachel*, Esther David brings before its readers a Jewish food culture specific to this community, on which also rested the ethnic identity of this community. The frequent description of Jewish recipes enables the readers to understand the integrated food culture with its distinctly unique Jewish flavours. The protagonist Rachel Dandekar, a lonely old widow whose children have migrated to Israel, is one of the last surviving Bene - Israeli Jews in the Indian village, Danda, which is one of the few original settlements of the Bene- Israeli Jews. She spends her time ruminating on the past, looking after the old and dilapidated Jewish synagogue and cooking traditional Jewish food. Rachel proclaims her individuality

through her ability to cook evocative food that is directly linked to her self esteem and her autonomy. She regards food as a poignant means to entertain, entwine, establish control and promote solidarity on the people around her. Each recipe in the beginning of each chapter is not a mere mention of the ingredients and the manner of cooking rather it seems closely related to the content of that particular chapter and a reminder of a specific episode in the tale of the banishment of the Jews from their original home in Israel and their consequent assimilation on the Konkan coast of Maharashtra. For instance, in the third chapter named 'Mutton Curry with Tamarind', the recipe is followed by a vivid and splendid narrative in which the author elaborates the significance of the tamarind tree in Rachel's in-laws' courtyard in the life of Rachel and her husband, Aaron.

At various stages in the novel, we are exposed to the magical powers of Rachel's cooking. For instance, when her daughter, Zephra, who is reluctant to get married, consumes the dish 'puranpoli' made by Rachel, Zephra feels allured to Judah, the lawyer helping Rachel in restoring the synagogue in Danda from being demolished. The next morning Zephra wakes up with a desire to consume something bitter like 'birda' to neutralize the effect of the sweet 'puranpolis' which she felt has some secret and magical ingredients that made her attracted to Judah. Perhaps, Rachel knows magic potions like the one she has used to enmesh her reluctant fiancé, Aaron who has been invited by Rachel's family for dinner after he has broken his engagement to her. The 'puranpolis' prepared by Rachel for Aaron are said to have restored the broken engagement and add sweetness and charm to their relationship. The sweetness of the dessert encourages Aaron to communicate the misunderstandings that have arisen between her mother and Aaron and also helps him to decide on marrying Rachel. The dessert that is heavily sweetened by Rachel supposedly included magical ingredients that fill its consumers with euphonious emotions, where Aaron has been attracted to Rachel and Zephra towards Judah. This novel thus recognizes 'food' as a

pivotal element in creating and sustaining human relations.

Rachel has always “believed that a family had to eat together to stick together” (91). Because eating together evokes a fundamental bonding, mutual appreciation and companionship among the family members. She opines that food if lovingly and vivaciously cooked will rejuvenate and sustain relationships. Her cooking of delectable Jewish savouries like green coconut curry, ‘chick cha halwa’, roasted goat tongue, etc enables her to overcome the physical absence of her children who whenever ring her up from Israel would often tell of how badly they miss the food she cooks. For Rachel, food is a powerful manifestation of togetherness and also a wonderful source of rejuvenation. In one instance, Rachel serves her second son, Jacob with roasted goat tongue hoping him to unravel his insecurities with regard to his feelings for Ilana, an Israeli Jewish girl. Jacob confesses his fear of being rejected by Ilana before Rachel, who eventually helps him win over Ilana and to get married to her. The recipes that Rachel cooks and serves have some veiled purposes and signify acceptance and bring people together. Her cuisine acts as a brilliant metaphor for her ethnic culture and provides her with a deep sense of identity in an alien ethos. As we proceed further in to the novel we see Rachel as a dame who reins over her kitchen and successfully employs food as a strong weapon to protect the synagogue. Food, for Rachel is not just a simple means of nourishment but a powerful element to instill desired impacts upon the consumers. For instance, she cooked and served ‘fried bombils’ or ‘Bombay duck’ to Judah to encourage him to ask for Zephra’s hand in marriage. Later on the Rachel employs ‘bombils to protect the synagogue, which is not a prayer house alone, but a souvenir that thrives the Jewish ethnic culture.

Other than cooking delicious Jewish food, there is nothing remarkably unique about Rachel, until we see her engaging in a passionate fight to rescue the synagogue, a monument of her faith and the one surviving association to her roots, from being demolished and

occupied by selfish builders. She employs her culinary prowess to save the synagogue. She uses a traditional Jewish food, 'bombil' to cajole Aarti Chinoy, the wife of Satish Chinoy, an estate developer who is planning to buy the synagogue and the surrounding area to build a tourist resort. Satish savours the 'bombils', rethinks his plans and finally promises Aarti to break up his deal with Mordecai, one of the committee members in charge of the synagogue. The way Rachel has won over Satish Chinoy with her ethnic dish is indicative of how food can be used as a weapon to bring about social and political changes. Rachel informs Satish's withdrawal to the committee members, each of whom are at once astonished. An immediate meeting of the committee members is called upon by Zephra at Rachel's house. The meeting culminated with the desired intention of Rachel who served the members with delicious snacks like 'samosas', fish fry and minced cutlet with scotch. The snacks cooked by Rachel act as catalysts to convince the members on the protection of the synagogue and the resignation of Mordecai, the evil committee member, who plotted to sell off the synagogue by passing it as his own ancestral property. The outstanding cuisine of Rachel thus proves to be elemental and successful in the protection and the restoration of the synagogue and its ethnicity. Rachel is presented as the saviour of the Jewish faith and the guardian of its purity. Her persistent struggles to protect the synagogue, a symbol of her faith, enable her to overcome the subjugations of dominant cultures and to retain her identity. Her fondness for the synagogue, a token of her ancestry is well revealed when she says that she always keeps the keys of it tied to her sari, "I even sleep with them" (61). Her daughter, Zephra believes that the keys of the synagogue are inseparable from her mother and "they were the keys to her mother's talisman for good health...they were the keys to her revival" (150). The unrelenting efforts of Rachel and her delicious ethnic food protect the Jewish synagogue as well the Jewish heritage.

Book of Rachel is not merely a compelling story of Rachel's incessant struggles to protect

her synagogue but also a wonderfully woven chronicle of a distinct community and their unique culinary culture. The idiosyncratic traditional culinary rules and habits as suggested in the Jewish dietary law are well portrayed in this novel. Their holy *Book of Exodus* dictates that Jews shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk and Jews are forced to use coconut milk as a substitute. Jews eat only those fish that have fins and scales. Fish is an omen of fortune among the Bene- Israeli Jews. There is a fish fry recipe in the very first chapter in which it is remarked that the "fish is the symbol of protection because she does not have eyelids and her eyes are always open and watchful" (1). Further the recipes that act as a symbol of their ethnicity by closely adhering to the basic tenets of Jewish cooking like not mixing meat and milk or not using animal's blood for cooking or eating non-kosher meat are evidently suggestive of their differences from their Konkani neighbours and simultaneously mark their ethnic distinctiveness. The vivid descriptions of the strict dietary laws and the recipes of Jewish food accord a great degree of literality to it, thereby imprinting it within the paradigm of a written narrative.

Esther David's *Book of Rachel* is quintessentially unique with the delineation of the ethnic recipes and the portrayal of the Jewish culture and tradition. Through this delicious delineation, David suggests the enabling nature of Rachel's recipes which come from a kitchen considered subversive as opposed to the power driven public sphere. The novel elegantly employs the motif of the protection of the synagogue to elucidate the rich cultural heritage of the diminishing Jewish community in India. Like a delicious Jewish food, this novel appeals to the readers and dearly exposes how food underscores the identities of the minority individuals and communities.

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